

A faithful missionary son cannot reconcile the Church's absolutist claims with the discrepancies so apparent to him and decides his integrity will no longer allow him to participate in the Church. A father asks if we might learn to bear a "kinder, gentler" testimony.

THE "T" WORD: TRADING OUR BIRTHRIGHT FOR A MESS OF CERTAINTY

By Keith E. Norman

OUR OLDEST SON COMPLETED HIS MISSION IN the summer of 2000 and returned home to Ohio from preaching to the benighted souls in the Utah Salt Lake South mission. Despite the locale, he faced many challenges—more than just the distraction of carloads of young Mormon women who would slow down to whistle and honk as they passed. His letters home conveyed increasing spiritual growth and self-understanding, and several times we received letters from strangers telling us how much they appreciated and admired his efforts. One of them follows:

Dear Brother and Sister Norman,

We have had the pleasure of meeting with your mission son here in Sandy, Utah. What a fine young man he is. We love him extra special. In fact, the youth and members of the whole stake love him very much. He is a fine example and we feel his kindness and his spirit when he comes into our homes and meets with us, our families and the members. I am the Bishop of the Hillcrest 7th Ward which is just one of several that he has come to meet with. Sometimes his companions have had other interests and would like to slip to the side and check out some TV. But not your son. He is always on task and is very disciplined. But he is also very personable with us.

You can be so very proud of him and know that he is doing a wonderful job here. It makes the members of our ward want to do missionary work and to bring their contacts to him for teaching. I should be happy to know how he does in his career and later in his life

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as he has shown such a fine way about him here in this area.

May the Lord bless you and your family always.

After picking ourselves up off the floor, our next reaction to this letter was to wonder if there were another Elder Norman in the same mission. But our perspective was warped—we had lived with him last as a teenager. Following a dramatic conversion to the Book of Mormon, he had gone on his mission a little later than most and so started out with the advantage of relative maturity. By the time he returned, he bore a strong testimony of the conversion power of the Holy Ghost, backed by numerous experiences. But his homecoming was all too brief; after barely a week, he was off to California to start school again.

A few months later, we received a startling call from him. Although he was still attending meetings, praying, and keeping Church standards, he now felt almost completely alienated from the Church and was contemplating dropping out entirely. He was very concerned that we would be upset with him and feel he had let us down. Oddly, although I am about as irretrievably Mormon as they come and certainly would like my children to experience a similar identity with and loyalty to the Church, I don't really feel disappointed in my son. My uneasy sense was that it was the Church that had let him down. And it is the Church's loss.

ACTUALLY, HIS "APOSTASY" came as no big surprise to us. It had been developing over some time—in fact, pretty much concurrently with his mission. For along with his spiritual maturation, he was undergoing intellectual growth which was largely being suppressed and sublimated by the pressures and restraints of his mission life. At one point he wrote, "My testimony of the Book of Mormon is the only thing that saves me. Actually, it saves me from a lot of concerns about the Church." As he endured to the end, I was hoping, perhaps naively, that he was finding a way to live with the am-

biguity and dissonance which formed the undercurrent to many of his mission letters.

Our son's disillusionment might be attributed to many factors. First, there is the 'wacko factor' he had to deal with: the crazy companions, half-baked investigators, and loopy members. Rumor was that the Salt Lake missions get a disproportionate share of problem missionaries, and our son insisted that more than fifty percent of the elders were on anti-depressants. "Kind of ironic for messengers of joy," he commented. One elder even took the opportunity in a mission conference to bear his testimony of Prozac. An early companion, during one of apparently many screaming fits, threw a mug so hard he left a hole in the wall. Luckily he was a bum shot; he had been aiming at our son's head. Later, a particularly surly companion made out a long list and announced he was calling the zone leaders. Great, thought Elder Norman, *now* what have I done to tick him off. He started to apologize, hoping to avoid a zone leader show-down. No, the companion said, it has nothing to do with you. This is a list of all the sins I have never repented of. I'm calling the zone leaders to confess. He showed the list to my son. It was long, explicit, and not a little shocking. Another companion had to be transferred to a mission on the East Coast to separate him from the teenage daughter of a member family whose mother was actively encouraging the liaison.

In the interests of charity, I will skip over the tales of some of his more colorful investigators. He did have a lot of baptisms, but most of them were nine- and ten-year old children of inactive members.

Speaking of members, the following is a letter I cannot resist sharing, although I trust is *not* representative. The context of the first half of the letter is a member split to teach a discussion to a particularly promising investigator:

It was a near disaster because I had the split from hell. This guy was crazy and he wouldn't shut up. He seemed to think that he was the missionary and it was driving me insane. As you probably guessed, he was a high priest. He was a pretty typical one, too—couldn't keep his mouth shut, can't stay on the topic, kept going off on tangents, especially with deep doctrine. We missionaries never look forward to the dreaded high priest splits. Unfortunately, they're the only ones who have the time to go out with us, so it's an ongoing curse. When I got home and reported the night's events to my companion, he replied that his split, who was also a high priest, was even worse, although we debated about that. His split went around telling people they were going to hell because they weren't married in the temple, and this guy was the ward mission leader! Now *that's* an effective way to convert people.

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I remember another time I was out on splits with a high priest. We were teaching a non-member about Joseph Smith and how this investigator could know for himself that Joseph is a prophet. My split, who apparently was inspired by the Spirit to share his conversion story, told our investigator that after he prayed to know the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, a ball of light appeared in his living room. It floated towards him, stopped in front of his face, and then zoomed out the window! From then on he knew that the Church was true. Needless to say, we haven't been able to get another appointment with that investigator. He realized just how crazy we Mormons really are.

Another time, Elder Joyce was with a high priest. Elder Joyce had just challenged the investigator to read the Book of Mormon and pray about it when the high priest stood up, raised his right hand to the square, and said, "I promise you in the name of

Jesus Christ that if you read the Book of Mormon *three times*, you will get a witness that it is true, and maybe even a *personal visitation* from the Lord himself!

Well, you know how the original saying goes, but I'm convinced that if the Church weren't true, the *high priests* would have ruined it a long time ago.

In my next letter to him, I hastened to point out that I am an elder . . . with no further aspirations.

To be fair, most members treated the missionaries very well, provided they didn't get too pesky about asking for referrals. But since in the Salt Lake non-mission field, they are forbidden to do door-to-door tracting, the missionaries pretty much *had* to get pesky. Not that it did much good. In Utah, if you say, "But I really don't *know* any non-members," you just might be telling the truth. And in some cases, that may be a good thing. One letter reported, "Last night we taught a first discussion to a fifteen-year old boy who just moved here from Michigan, so he hasn't had time to be offended by the Utah Mormons yet." After telling us of a young Hindu woman he was teaching, he commented, "It must be hard to be a minority in Utah, especially when they change 'Martin Luther King Day' to 'Human Rights Day.'"

Elder Norman encountered members and several missionaries who were adamant that blacks were fence-sitters in the pre-existence although, as the priesthood half of an older missionary couple put it, "not evil enough to follow Satan." This missionary genuinely thought he was being charitable. His wife had even added, helpfully, "And when you think about it, it makes so much sense!" One companion insisted that Cain

yet walks the earth as Bigfoot, and claimed Spencer W. Kimball as his authority.

Probably our son's most recurrent complaint was how mission leaders would hound them for baptisms. "All the zone leaders care about is numbers," he lamented at regular intervals. "The zone leaders are after us for more baptisms so we can beat the Kearns zone." "We baptized an eight-year old today, but since she is from a member family, inactive, she won't count as far as the zone leaders are concerned." "The mission president committed us to five hundred baptisms in July. Since the previous record was one hundred seventy, no one remotely believes in it, but nobody had the guts to say so. That would hurt their chances for promotion." "All these guys ever talk about is statistics. That's how they get ahead. They are the future leaders of the Church."

You may have noticed in my son a lack of deference to proper authority. It did not stop with zone leaders. He related how the Assistants to the President had stormed into a former companion's apartment and confiscated his CDs and Nintendo. At least in this case, the mission president intervened to restore the private property of the elder, however inappropriate it may have been for a missionary to have these items with him in the field. But Elder Norman noted that, after promising that he was not going to impose any new rules on them—they only needed to follow the missionary handbook—the mission president subsequently tightened up on their permitted reading list, restricted the approved music to hymns and classical composers provided they had been dead for more than one hundred years, and banned all email communication. In fairness, some or all of these stricter rules may have come from the loftier offices at the north end of the valley, but whether they were mission-wide or church-wide, to our son, they seemed arbitrary and unduly oppressive. "I feel like he doesn't want us to think for ourselves. Is blind obedience

really a principle of the Gospel?" he wrote. "Didn't Joseph Smith say to teach righteous principles and let people govern themselves?" He especially missed being able to read SUNSTONE. His brief stint as a district leader ended when he permitted his charges to attend a ward New Year's Eve party. Although they were home by 9:30 p.m. as required by mission rules, they had not been authorized to be at the ward activity that night; they were supposed to have been out proselytizing. "What about all the other missionaries? Were they out teaching on New Year's Eve?" I asked him. "I doubt it very much," he replied, "but I was dumb enough to tell them the truth when I called in my report that night." As it turned out, he was glad to be relieved of the extra responsibility. A chip off the old block, I'm afraid. In one letter he wrote, "My worst fear growing up is now being realized. I'm becoming more like you all the time, Dad." I choose to take that as a compliment.

ALTHOUGH A TYPICAL missionary in Ohio where I reside can easily serve two years without confronting some of the stickier historical and doctrinal issues associated with the Church, no such luxury is likely on a Utah mission assignment. Opposition to the Church in all things abounds, and its detractors love to bash with unsuspecting young missionaries. Elder Norman sharpened his skills as a defender of the faith in these encounters, but they also raised some serious questions for him. Why did the Church lag behind the rest of the country in disavowing racist practices and teaching? Why is the temple ceremony so heavily influenced by Freemasonry? How can the Church accept the Book of Abraham as scripture when it is clearly unrelated to the papyri that Joseph Smith claimed to be translating? If we believe that Jesus was the Savior for zillions of worlds but fulfilled his mortal mission only here, isn't that like the Catholics persecuting Galileo for teaching that the earth is not the center of

the universe? What do those other worlds teach about the Savior—that they were just too dull to have their own? What eternal principle is served by restricting the role of women in the Church? What do you tell someone who claims they've felt the Spirit at *their* church but not at the LDS meetings? Finally, after being transferred from working-class Kearns to up-scale Cottonwood, he spent a P-day playing basketball in a member's private, full-size gym. He wondered, do these people counting all their blessings on the East Bench ever look across the valley and consider whether some of their fellow saints could



CAL GIRONDE (from Sunday's Foyer)

